

October 24, 2023

The Honorable Robyn K. Kennedy

Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Jay D. Livingstone

House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, Vice Chairs, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of almost 60 private and public organizations that collectively advocate for the availability, accessibility, and quality of services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth, and families. We are writing today **in support of "an act to establish a Massachusetts Children's Cabinet"** ([S.79](#) / [H.189](#)), which has long been desired to reduce problematic silos and enhance collaborative solutions.

Overview: A Children's Cabinet that comprises all executive office Secretaries and Commissioners serving children has the opportunity to enhance the well-being of children and families through better coordination of services, more efficient use of state and federal resources, and more comprehensive data-driving decision-making. It is critical that the established advisory committee's wide range of voices be expanded to specifically include community-based providers and advocates across child services, and to require representation from the diverse and vulnerable populations within in our sector, such as youth/families of color, LGBTQIA+ youth, and children with disabilities to ensure that the intersecting needs of families are effectively met. This structure, used by many cabinets, ensures high-level officials can have candid discussions while also incorporating stakeholder voices in decision making.¹

Need - challenges: Proponents and experts, including our members and the Children and Adolescent Health Initiative coalition, acknowledge that it is hard to be kid today, as we are seeing increased behavioral health issues with higher acuity levels. Parents are also having a difficult time, including because of lack of access to affordable childcare, family support, and coordinated care. The pandemic exacerbated challenges, disrupting regular service-delivery structures, exposing pervasive inequities among the most vulnerable citizens, and necessitated innovative solutions.² Children and families needing assistance typically benefit by receiving

¹ Toward Interagency Collaboration: The Role of Children's Cabinets. Policy Brief. Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy (June 2009) p. 15. <https://www.renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/TowardInteragencyCollab.pdf>

² Reville, Paul. The Urgent Need for Childre's Cabinets: How our experience with COVID-19 shows these partnerships to be a necessity – for all communities (March 27, 2020). Harvard Graduate School of Education –

support and services from more than one agency and those agencies are too siloed, which can make programs “messy in real life.”³ Families involved in child welfare are often served by the Department of Children and Families and usually have additional needs that are being (or should be) addressed by the education system/schools, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Youth Services, a Family Resource Center, the Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, a Community Behavioral Health Center, and/or others. In addition, each member of the family may have their own individualized spectrum of services being met by different programs/agencies. Systems coordination is necessary for the efficacy of programs and services and improved outcomes for families.

Need - opportunities: Coordinating enhanced systems with bodies like children’s cabinets “enabl[es] the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts and creat[es] accountability across government agencies that increases coherence, efficacy and equity...”⁴ Children’s cabinets coordinate services, develop a common set of goals and outcomes, and implement plans to foster equity and well-being for young people based on state/local priorities and context.⁵ By removing barriers and ensuring our children and family serving departments collaborate, we will see better data collection/review, gap analyses, identification of assets to fill holes, and build stronger response strategies for children and family needs. We anticipate the ability of our state to improve systems-level governance, stakeholder engagement, and equitable outcomes for all children, such as through improved planning for high-quality early childhood education and better access to mental health counseling.

Background: When Governor Deval Patrick created a 2008 Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet, it hinged on a principle we stand behind: “our success in fostering children's healthy development and family well-being will depend, to a substantial degree, on the extent to which the Commonwealth can provide for the consistent, efficient and effective coordination of effort between and among the government agencies whose services, programs and delivery systems must collectively address the needs of the whole child and his or her family.”⁶ Experts urged for

Usable Knowledge. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/20/03/urgent-need-childrens-cabinets>; Wiener, Ross. How Children’s Cabinets Can Meet the Needs of Families and Youth. Ed Note: Your education policy blog (April 22, 2022) <https://ednote.ecs.org/how-childrens-cabinets-can-meet-the-needs-of-families-and-youth/>

³ Children’s Cabinet Networks. The Forum for Youth Investment/Children’s Cabinet Networks (2019)

<https://forumfyi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/State-Childrens-Cabinet-Network-overview.pdf>

⁴ Wiener, Ross. How Children’s Cabinets Can Meet the Needs of Families and Youth. Ed Note: Your education policy blog (April 22, 2022) <https://ednote.ecs.org/how-childrens-cabinets-can-meet-the-needs-of-families-and-youth/>

⁵ Children’s Cabinet Networks. The Forum for Youth Investment/Children’s Cabinet Networks (2019)

<https://forumfyi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/State-Childrens-Cabinet-Network-overview.pdf>

⁶ Governor Deval Patrick and Lieutenant Governor Timony Murray. Creating the Governor’s Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet. Executive Order No. 505. Office of the Governor, Commonwealth of Massachusetts (October, 28 2008) <https://www.mass.gov/doc/executive-order-505-mass-register-1117/download>

the establishment of the Cabinet as a permanent structure adopted by legislative statutes, because of the need for long-term planning and oversight surviving administrative changes.⁷ This expired initiative focused on personal, educational, and economic status of children and acknowledged “the education and development of children occurs not only in schools but also in families, neighborhoods, communities and our broader society.”⁸ Today, the Commonwealth needs to resurrect such an effort by establishing a stronger children’s cabinet that we can entrust to address more comprehensive collaboration among agencies serving children and families day in and out.

Best practices: Numerous states have at least one Children’s Cabinet, including our neighbors in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, and New York and beyond from Pennsylvania to Oregon.⁹ Review of existing cabinets illuminates best practices, which are included in this bill, such as developing a cohesive vision and strategic plan with goals members and key stakeholders are committed to achieving, along with measurable outcomes.¹⁰ Additional best practices include incorporating support from the Executive Office of the Governor and soliciting input from the public.¹¹ Children’s cabinets can improve the effectiveness of services and supports to children and families because they can improve coordination, collaboration, and coherence across agencies.¹² This bill establishes a much-needed Children’s Cabinet that can be successful here in Massachusetts.

Conclusion: We urge the Committee to (1) incorporate our recommendation to include community-based providers and advocates across child services in the advisory committee and require representation from the diverse and vulnerable populations within in our sector, and

⁷ Toward Interagency Collaboration: The Role of Children’s Cabinets. Policy Brief. Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy (June 2009) p. 15. <https://www.renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/TowardInteragencyCollab.pdf>

⁸ Governor Deval Patrick and Lieutenant Governor Timony Murray. Creating the Governor’s Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet. Executive Order No. 505. Office of the Governor, Commonwealth of Massachusetts (October, 28 2008) <https://www.mass.gov/doc/executive-order-505-mass-register-1117/download>

⁹ State Children’s Cabinet Network. The Forum for Youth Investment. <https://forumfyi.org/ccn/state/>; A Governor’s Guide to Children’s Cabinets. National Governor’s Association for Best Practices (August 2004) <https://nwi.pdx.edu/pdf/ChildrensCabinet-NatGovernorsAssoc.pdf>

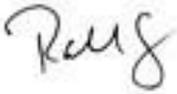
¹⁰ Toward Interagency Collaboration: The Role of Children’s Cabinets. Policy Brief. Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy (June 2009) p. 15. <https://www.renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/TowardInteragencyCollab.pdf>; A Governor’s Guide to Children’s Cabinets. National Governor’s Association for Best Practices (August 2004) <https://nwi.pdx.edu/pdf/ChildrensCabinet-NatGovernorsAssoc.pdf>

¹¹ A Governor’s Guide to Children’s Cabinets. National Governor’s Association for Best Practices (August 2004) <https://nwi.pdx.edu/pdf/ChildrensCabinet-NatGovernorsAssoc.pdf>

¹² Strong and Sustainable Children’s Cabinets: A Discussion Guide for State Leaders. The Aspen Institute, Education & Society Program/The Forum for Youth Investment (March 2022) <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/childrens-cabinets-report-030122.pdf>; Wiener, Ross. How Children’s Cabinets Can Meet the Needs of Families and Youth. Ed Note: Your education policy blog (April 22, 2022) <https://ednote.ecs.org/how-childrens-cabinets-can-meet-the-needs-of-families-and-youth/>

(2) report this bill out Committee favorably and secure its timely passage, as lead sponsor Senator DiDomenico has encouraged, “so we can coordinate government agencies to use every lever of power to feed, house, and protect our kids”, as well as enhance health and education outcomes. ¹³

Sincerely,



Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children’s League of Massachusetts

Supporting Members of the Children’s League

Brandon Residential Treatment Center, Inc.
Bridges Homeward
Family and Community Resources, Inc.
Gándara Mental Health Center, Inc.
Heading Home, Inc.
The Home for Little Wanderers
HopeWell, Inc.
Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange
Open Sky Community Services
Plummer Youth Promise
Roxbury Youthworks, Inc.
St. Ann’s Home & School, Inc.
Saint Vincent’s Services, Inc.
Wayside Youth & Family Support Network, Inc.

¹³ DiDomenico Unveils Bill to Establish a Children’s Cabinet in Massachusetts. Press Release (March 31, 2023)
<https://www.senatordidomenico.com/press-releases/2023/3/31/didomenico-unveils-bill-to-establish-a-childrens-cabinet-in-massachusetts>